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An Undefined Something Else: Barthes, Culture, Neutral Life

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Neutral Life

When Alain Robbe-Grillet likened Roland Barthes to an eel, he could not have known quite how much posthumous wriggling there would be. What he saw in 1981 as the characteristic ‘slippings and slidings’ (2011: 53) have become more pronounced with time, as the body of work bearing Barthes’s name has expanded extensively in the years since his death. In swelling so, it has called for reconsideration. Barthes is not what he once was; in death he has found new lives, other lives, plural lives.

Proof lies in the present pages. The texts gathered here by Sunil Manghani beneath the promise of ‘Neutral Life’ would have been unthinkable two decades ago. They speak of and to a different Roland Barthes. Their close, committed interest in the Neutral, as described and desired by Barthes in his lecture course of 1977-78 at the Collège de France, owes its very existence to the belated publication of those teaching notes as *Le Neutre* in 2002 and their subsequent translation into English three years later. While it is true that the Neutral had long flickered in Barthes’s work as, in his own words, ‘a stubborn affect (in fact, ever since *Writing Degree Zero*)’ (2005: 8), it was not until the appearance of the teaching materials from 1977-78 that the full implications, the full potential, became apparent.¹ ‘*Le Neutre* reaches us late’, Anca Parvulescu wrote in the pages of *Diacritics* some years ago. ‘Like an echo, it needed time, and it took time to come’ (2007: 32). Neutral Life, accordingly, lingered long in the womb.

The Neutral is merely one of many recent posthumous publication to carry Roland Barthes’s name, of course. It sits alongside, among other things: five further collections of teaching notes (2013, 2011a, 2011b, 2010a, 2007), two journals (2011c, 2010b), a late account of modernity (2010c), and the letters, notes and short texts of the centenary *Album* (2015a). This coursing ‘posthumous life’, to use Andy Stafford’s knowingly paradoxical phrase (2015: 9), has led to what might be called a renaissance of Roland Barthes, but a

renaissance, it should be stressed, that is not a pale revival of the Same.² In being reborn, Barthes has acquired a rather different form, and because the 'posthumous life' has unearthed new desires and directions which had been waiting patiently within the archive, critics have found themselves required to rethink their understandings of Barthes's *oeuvre* in the light of the newly available material. Beyond death, difference. And in that difference, Neutral Life.

I have offered my own detailed thoughts on this renaissance and its repercussions in *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes* (2016). Instead of revisiting the propositions of that book here, I wish instead to turn to questions which I did not discuss in its pages. These are questions which, it seems to me, critics have not addressed sufficiently to date; this essay, then, is an intervention, a call for change in the realm of cultural criticism. What, I want to ask, does the Neutral mean for the enlisting of Barthes's work in the analysis of culture? How does Roland Barthes the cultural critic change when, late in the day, he turns to Neutral Life, and how might we need to reorient ourselves, shift our stance, learn to look and live differently? How might Neutral Life breathe new life into the work of cultural criticism?

'La Cuisine du Sens'

Barthes is known most readily in the anglophone world, of course, as a cultural critic – a delicate fondler of meanings wherever they should come to life and catch his eye. (The French acceptance of his being, quite simply, an *écrivain* has yet to travel truly.) In early works such as *Mythologies* and *Elements of Semiology*, there is, spurred on by the Saussurean sign and sketch of semiology, a delight in discovering that the signifier need not necessarily belong to speech or writing.³ 'I had just read Saussure' (2009: xvii) is, to my mind, one of the most revealing sentences in the whole of Barthes's work, because of the enabling breakthrough that it recalls.⁴ A short text entitled 'La Cuisine du sens', translated by Richard Howard as 'The Kitchen of Meaning', summarized the discovery in the pages of *Le Nouvel Observateur* in December 1964:

A garment, an automobile, a dish of cooked food, a gesture, a film, a piece of music, an advertising image, a piece of furniture, a newspaper headline – these indeed appear to be heterogeneous objects.

What might they have in common? This at least: all are signs. When I walk through the streets – or through life – and encounter these objects, I apply to all of them, if need be without realizing it, one and the same activity, which is that of a certain *reading*: modern man, urban man, spends his time reading. He reads, first of all and above all, images, gestures, behaviors: this car tells me the social status of its owner, this garment tells me quite precisely the degree of its wearer's conformism or eccentricity, this *apéritif* (whiskey, Pernod, or white wine and cassis) reveals my host's lifestyle (Barthes 1994: 157)⁵

'The world', Barthes concludes, 'is full of signs', and 'the semiologist, like the linguist, must enter "the kitchen of meaning"' (158). This, he adds immediately,

is a tremendous undertaking. Why? Because a meaning can never be analysed in an isolated fashion. If I establish that blue jeans are the sign of a certain adolescent dandyism, or the *pot-au-feu* photographed by a luxury magazine that of a rather theatrical rusticity, and if I even multiply these equivalences in order to constitute lists of signs resembling the columns of a dictionary, I shall have discovered nothing at all. *The signs are constituted by differences.* (158-59)

Entering the kitchen of meaning, moreover, is not a move undertaken in order to observe proceedings passively: as *Mythologies* makes clear, the project is to track down ruthlessly the 'ideological abuse' in 'the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*' (2009: xix). This 'systematic reflection' (1994: 157) will draw upon 'all the resources of linguistics' (1994: 159), which, in its Saussurean incarnation at least, understands the cultural contingency of meaning.

This is classic, familiar, early Barthes – the semiological Barthes of a thousand and one undergraduate lectures; the Barthes whose withering analysis of everyday life has inspired critics such as Rosalind Coward (1984), Gilbert Adair (1986), Umberto Eco (1994), Marjorie Garber (1999), and Peter Conrad (2016) to produce their own exposures of what Barthes called 'ideological abuse'. But we now know that there was another Barthes, a later Barthes, a posthumous Barthes – a Barthes for whom 'la cuisine du sens' had become *cuisante*, a Barthes for whom language was relentlessly antagonistic, a Barthes who articulated a retreating desire for exemption from signification.⁶ Enter the Neutral.

'I am trapped by language', Barthes told his audience at the Collège de France on 11 March 1978 (2005: 57). Two weeks later he took a somewhat longer view:

All my life long, I've been living this back-and-forth: caught up between the exaltation of language [*jouissance* taken in its drive] [→ whence: my writing, my speaking are glued to my social being, since I publish and I teach] and the desire, the great desire for a respite from language, for a suspension, an exemption. (2005: 93; translation modified)⁷

While the wish for an exemption from meaning was not new to Barthes's work in 1978 – it had made notable earlier appearances in 'The Death of the Author' in 1967 (1986: 54), in *Empire of Signs* in 1970 (1983: 73-76), and in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in 1975 (1995: 87) – the course on the Neutral treated the desire with fresh and fuller force. Minutes after declaring himself to be 'trapped by language', for instance, Barthes announced that 'what's at stake in this course' is 'an ethics of language' (2005: 60). More precisely, the thirteen sessions concern themselves with 'every inflection that, dodging or baffling the paradigmatic, oppositional structure of meaning, aims at the suspension of the conflictual basis of discourse' (2005: 211).⁸ This is the desire for the Neutral, 'thought and practice of the non-conflictual' (2005: 44).

Such conflict exists because, following Saussure:

the paradigm is the wellspring of meaning; where there is meaning, there is paradigm, and where there is paradigm (opposition), there is meaning → elliptically put: meaning rests on conflict (the choice of one term against another), and all conflict is generative of meaning: to choose *one* and refuse the *other* is always a sacrifice made to meaning, to produce meaning, to offer it to be consumed. (2005: 7)

The findings of the *Course in General Linguistics* have been rearticulated: meaning depends upon difference, Saussure had proposed, but Barthes rephrases this in 1978 to present meaning as an effect of conflict. The sign is agonistic, antagonistic. In a later section of *The Neutral*, Barthes explains – on a page which implicitly places Saussure alongside Marx, Freud, and Darwin as a theorist of the 'amplification and deepening of the philosophies of conflict' (2005: 126) – how this has become a cause for concern for him:

In short, Western tradition is problematic for me in this: not because it decides that conflict exists, that the world is conflictual, but: because it

transforms conflict into a nature and a value (or, another version of the same refusal: making a value out of nature). (2005: 126)

What is to be done? How might we live, live otherwise? How might this naturalization of conflict be countered, neutralized? In a memorable section of the course entitled 'Answer', Barthes outlines a reply to such questions. He begins by identifying the power which underlies every linguistic exchange founded upon the anticipated passage from query to response:

The answer: part of discourse that is commanded by the form 'question'. Now, what I want to point out is that there is always a terrorism of the question; a power is implied in every question. The question denies the right not to know or the right to indeterminate desire. (2005: 107; trans. modified)⁹

'Every question transforms me into a trapped rat', Barthes continues, because a question 'entraps one in an alternative', a binary opposition: to answer or not to answer (2005: 108). The latter – silence – might seem like an obvious way to undermine the power of the questioner, but refusing to reply, Barthes points out, 'very quickly leads the one who doesn't answer to death, erasure, or madness' (2005: 108). 'What we must do' instead, he concludes, '[...] is to learn how to denaturalize questioning' (2005: 108) and, in doing so, to cultivate an allergy to the paradigm (2005: 197).

He offers by way of illustration an account of an incident that took place in the summer of 1977 in the southern French town of Urt, where he had a second home for many years. When greeting a young woman in a shop, Barthes explains, he followed polite social convention and opened the conversation with the remark, 'The weather was nice yesterday' (2005: 113). In reply to such a comment, he notes, 'one might expect yes/no (and rather more yes, since the subject is not conflictual!)' (2005: 113).¹⁰ He was surprised, then, when the woman replied 'It was hot', for this response 'neither affirms nor denies the nice weather, [but] displaces the paradigm toward another paradigm, indeed another value' (2005: 113). Her refusal to follow the expected paradigmatic format (yes/no) when responding is, Barthes proposes, '[m]ore subtle' (2005: 112) than simple silence; her reply is a 'deviation' (2005: 113) that, 'even though verbalized, [does not] run on the same tracks' as the original question (2005: 112). It is, in short, a case of 'derailment', a utopian 'opening in the direction of an undefined something else' (2005: 112).

Barthes's power as questioner and curator of the conversation has been stalled – neutralized – by the woman's decision to reply in a manner that shifts

the rules of the game, that keeps the discussion open and ongoing, that fails to close the conversation with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. In short, her brief response demonstrates how to 'baffle the arrogant request for a good reply' (2005: 109): it sidesteps assertion and what Barthes goes on to call 'the arrogance of unity' (2005: 161). If it is naive to uphold what Jean-François Lyotard once called 'a serene belief in dialogue' (1993: 145), it does not follow that the power and caging arrogance of paradigmatic discourse must go unchallenged. In the grain of the everyday, in the most ordinary cultural ritual – a conversation in a shop – there shimmers a deconstruction of the opposition between 'yes' and 'no'.¹¹ The *Neutral*, as imagined by Barthes in the course of 1977-78, offers alternatives, flight, respite, exemption, suspension.¹² It 'would look for a right relation to the present, attentive and not arrogant' (2005: 83). It 'does not necessarily correspond to the flat, utterly depreciated image that the doxa assumes but could constitute a strong, active value' (2005: 211). It is something to live for, something to desire, something to sound. The course of 1977-78, as an investigation of 'the ethics of language', is as much about relating to others as Barthes's previous course at the Collège de France, *How to Live Together*. 'What I am looking for, during the preparation of this course', Barthes stated in the opening session of *The Neutral*, 'is an introduction to living, a guide to life (ethical project)' (2005: 11).

Beyond *Mythologies*

This is all a long way from *Mythologies*. What we find two decades on at the Collège, and what the essays on 'Neutral Life' in the present volume of *TCS* address, is a decidedly different approach to culture – its analysis and its antagonism. We are no longer in the realm of simple semiology, of learning to see signs as signs and to unveil the History hidden by Nature. Philippe Sollers has proposed that the most striking thing about Barthes's work is its strategy (2015: 41), and what catches my eye most often in *The Neutral* are the strategies for living, for inhabiting and interpreting culture with nuanced tact.¹³ This posthumous Barthes invites us to read and react differently. We are not invited in *The Neutral* to occupy or occupy ourselves with 'the kitchen of meaning', for signs are oppressively overbearing in their paradigmatic demands. If 'modern man, urban man, spends his time reading', he also spends his time, *The Neutral* proposes, terrorized by meaning, 'trapped by language'.¹⁴

The task – and Barthes admits that it is fraught, paradoxical, aporetic – becomes one of analysing that which 'in fact aims to outplay analysis' (2005:

36), of remaining attentive to moments and practices which foil arrogance, baffle agonism, suspend the paradigm. The Neutral, he noted in an interview published in 1979, involves 'trying to find new – and somewhat original – modes of engagement: a fragmented engagement, a discontinuous engagement, an unexpected engagement, an oscillating engagement' (2015b: 116). And the 'desire for Neutral', he proposes (dropping the definite article), is desire for:

- first: suspension (*épochè*) of orders, laws, summons, arrogances, terrorisms, puttings on notice, demands, the will-to-possess.
- then, by way of deepening, refusal of pure discourse of opposition. Suspension of narcissism: no longer to be afraid of images (*imago*): to dissolve one's own image (a wish that borders on the negative mystical discourse, or Zen or Tao). (2005: 12-13; translation modified)¹⁵

The Neutral might twinkle in linguistic exchanges (as in the example of 'It was hot'), but it surfaces elsewhere, too, and Barthes offers many examples in the thirteen sessions of the course as he takes 'the word "Neutral", insofar as its referent inside me is a stubborn affect [...], for a series of walks along a certain number of readings' (2005: 8), and in an explicitly aleatory fashion (2005: 12).¹⁶ The feeling of being weary, for instance, catches Barthes's eye because it baffles the conventional opposition, or paradigm, between malady and wellbeing. 'Is weariness an illness or not?', he asks, before noting that depression has 'a nosological reality (perhaps through the creation of a – supposedly – relevant pharmacopeia): one can have sick leaves for "depression" (exemption from military service, etc.)' (2005: 17). The latter condition, in short, is culturally marked as an illness. 'But weariness?', he continues:

Try this experiment: draw up a table of received (credible) excuses: you want to cancel a lecture, an intellectual task: what excuses will be beyond suspicion, beyond reply? Weariness? Surely not. (2005: 17)

Unlike depression (and mourning), he concludes, 'weariness is not coded, is not received' (2005: 17). It is, rather, 'unclassified, therefore unclassifiable: without premises, without place, socially untenable' (2005: 17) – and this is precisely why the desire for the Neutral is drawn to the experience of being weary. Quoting Blanchot, Barthes observes that weariness is 'a state that is not possessive' (2005: 20), an 'intensity' (2005: 18) which outplays the conventional coding of everyday life.

The timing is good; the Neutral has arrived at a moment of need. In the realm of anglophone cultural criticism, the name of Roland Barthes is still most readily and repeatedly associated with *Mythologies*, with the early

explorations of semiology, with what Jean-Claude Milner (2003) has called ‘the revelation of the Sign’.¹⁷ It has often seemed to me in recent years, however, that continuing to make a model and a mission out of *Mythologies* runs the risk of settling complacently into a critical piety born from the self-satisfied revelation of what is hidden beneath the surface of the everyday. We have seen this trick often enough in cultural studies, I think. It is tired, easy, and the moment has come to move on, to realize that vaulting as a vanguard into ‘the kitchen of meaning’ in order merely to unmask myths is not enough. Signs are too cunning, too subtle, too stubborn, too strong.

Barthes appears to have recognised something of this by the time he came to write a second preface for *Mythologies* in 1970. After noting that the work ‘has a double theoretical framework: on the one hand, an ideological critique bearing on the the language of so-called mass-culture; on the other, a first attempt to analyse semiologically the mechanics of this language’, he added: ‘It is obvious that the two attitudes which determined the origin of the book could no longer today be maintained unchanged’ (2009: xvii). ‘[I]deological criticism’, he continued, ‘[...] has become more sophisticated, or at least ought to do so’ (2009: xvii). One year later, in a short text entitled ‘Mythology Today’, he asked himself rhetorically if anything had changed since 1957 (the year of *Mythologies*). ‘Not French society’, he replied, ‘at least on this level, for mythic history is on a different time scale from political history; nor the myths, nor even the analysis; there is still a great deal of *the mythic* in our society’ (1986: 66). But what ‘has changed in the last fifteen years’, he added, ‘is the *science of reading*, under whose scrutiny myth, like an animal long since captured and observed, nonetheless becomes a *different object*’ (1986: 66). In ‘Mythology Today’, in 1971, the shift is from the sign (which Saussure had, of course, understood to be the union of *signifiant* and *signifié*) to a ‘science of the signifier’ whose ‘goal is not so much the analysis of the sign as its dislocation’ (1986: 66). This is evidently a Barthes who has read the early Derrida and come to recognise that the signified is, as *Of Grammatology* puts it, ‘*always already in the position of the signifier*’ (Derrida 1976: 73).¹⁸ Nearly a decade and half on from *Mythologies*, Barthes declares, ‘any student can denounce the bourgeois or petit-bourgeois character of a form (of life, of thought, of consumption); in other words, a mythological *endoxa* has been created: demystification (or demythification) has itself become a discourse, a corpus of phrases, a catechistic statement’ (1986: 66). Time, then, to move on.

It is now possible, I think, to read such propositions as stepping stones towards the approach to culture outlined later in the 1970s in *The Neutral*. (Because of the publishing history, this could not have been apparent before the posthumous arrival of *Le Neutre* in 2002, of course.) Culture is still, for the

Barthes of 1977-78, 'webs of significance', an 'acted document', in the words of Clifford Geertz (1973: 5, 10), but there is now an awareness that if meaning depends upon difference, as Saussure proposed, then meaning therefore depends upon *conflict* (in the form of the paradigm). *The Neutral* is not an analysis of cultural forms in order to expose '*what-goes-without-saying*' in the *doxa* (2009: xix); it is, rather, an aleatory dossier which searches for non-conflictual, non-arrogant, non-paradigmatic flashes within the oppressive drone of days. We might, as cultural critics, learn from this. Culture, as Louis Althusser once pointed out, 'has been lying in wait for each infant born since before his birth, and seizes him before his first cry' (1971: 211). The late Barthes, who had little explicitly to say about Althusser, nonetheless appears to agree (perhaps because Althusser sounds more Lacanian than Marxist at this particular moment).¹⁹ But there is also hope – vertiginous hope founded upon a delicate attention to what outplays, what baffles, what undoes the paradigm.²⁰ This hope has a name and wriggles like an eel: Neutral Life.

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Notes

¹ Near the end of *The Neutral*, in fact, Barthes goes one step further and calls the course in question a ‘remake of *Writing Degree Zero*’ (2005: 176).

² Indeed, a large conference entitled ‘The Renaissance of Roland Barthes’ took place at the CUNY Graduate Center, New York, in April 2013. For a selection of papers from the event, see the September 2014 issue of *The Conversant*: <http://theconversant.org/>, (accessed on 8 November 2016).

³ Saussure imagined the science of semiology in an early chapter of the *Course in General Linguistics*: ‘A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* [...]. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance’ (Saussure 1974: 16). In *Elements of Semiology*, Barthes identifies ‘the possibility of inverting Saussure’s declaration: linguistics is not a part of the general science of signs, even a privileged part, it is semiology which is part of linguistics: to be precise, it is that part covering the *great signifying unities* of discourse’ (1973: 11).

⁴ I use the term ‘enabling’ at this point because Barthes refers, in ‘Answers’, to how Saussure ‘enabled’ him to ‘define ideology by way of the semantic schema of connotation’ (2015b: 20). Not long after making this statement, Barthes adds that ‘in my case the semiological urge comes from Saussure’ (2015b: 22).

⁵ ‘The Kitchen of Meaning’ is not inaccurate as a title, but it should be remembered that the French term ‘*cuisine*’ can refer both to the room in which food is prepared *and* to the act of preparation itself. No perfect English translation exists.

⁶ *Cuisante* can mean, among other things, ‘bitter’ (as in ‘a bitter regret’ or ‘a bitter failure’).

⁷ I have modified the published English translation here, for it seems to me that ‘jouissance’ has been discussed widely enough in anglophone contexts for the term to be left in French. Having said that, Chris Turner makes a persuasive case for retaining the much-criticized ‘bliss’ in his translation of Barthes’s ‘Supplement’ (Barthes 2015c: 163).

⁸ For a perceptive discussion of the relationship between the paradigm and the Neutral in Barthes, see Comment 2003: 63.

⁹ I have altered the published translation once again here. The quotation ends in French with the words ‘le droit au désir incertain’ (2002: 145). Krauss and Hollier render this as ‘the right to the indeterminacy of desire’, but I have tried to be more faithful to the original text. The discussions of power and resistance in *The Neutral* mark a point at which the late Barthes comes into clear contact with Michel Foucault, who had, of course, played a significant part in the election of Barthes to the Collège de France – although Tiphaine Samoyault’s recent biography reveals that his role was not as extensive as is often claimed (Samoyault 2015: 567-73). For a detailed study of

Barthes and Foucault at the Collège, see Bellon 2012. For a thoughtful, though pre-*Neutral*, discussion of power in the late Barthes, see Holland 1988.

¹⁰ Early in *The Neutral*, Barthes identifies the ‘yes/no’ alternative as ‘the universal model for the very idea of paradigm’ (2005: 42).

¹¹ My use of ‘deconstruct’ here is deliberate, for it seems to me that *The Neutral*, in its affirmation of moments at which a paradigm is unsettled by something that fails to follow binary logic, is a text where the influence of Jacques Derrida can be seen. I have discussed this from a different perspective in Chapter 4 of *The Afterlives of Roland Barthes*. As I note there (2016: 81), it came as no surprise to me to see, when the publication of *Album* in 2015 brought to light for the first time many of Barthes’s letters, the correspondence between Barthes and Derrida revealing that the former wrote to the latter in November 1967 to thank him for *Of Grammatology*, while Derrida articulated his admiration for *S/Z* in a letter to Barthes on 22 March 1970 (Barthes 2015a: 336-37).

¹² This promise, perhaps even jubilation, marks one of the main ways in which Barthes’s *Neutral* differs from the *Neutral* of Maurice Blanchot. For a detailed discussion of this, see Marty 2010.

¹³ Barthes discusses the notion of ‘tact’ at length in *The Neutral* (2005: 29-36).

¹⁴ The course of 1977-78 began, it is worth remembering, not long after Barthes had used his inaugural lecture at the Collège to claim that language ‘is quite simply fascist’ (1979: 33). He returns to this provocative proposition on a number of occasions in *The Neutral* (2005: 42, 52, and 189-90, for example), which can be read in part as a blossoming of the brief bursts of the inaugural lecture.

¹⁵ I have amended the published English translation slightly here, for it omits from the first list the term ‘demands’ (*demandes*). For the original French, see Barthes 2002: 38.

¹⁶ For more on the aleatory quality of *The Neutral*, see Bellon 2012: 155-59.

¹⁷ Milner uses the term frequently in *Le Pas philosophique de Roland Barthes*. Above all, see Part 3 of the book.

¹⁸ The phrasing of ‘Mythology Today’ is strikingly Derridean at one point, in fact: ‘The world, taken obliquely by language, is written, through and through; signs, constantly deferring their foundations, transforming their signifieds into new signifieds, quoting each other to infinity, nowhere come to a halt: writing is generalized’ (1986: 67). However, it should be noted that Richard Howard’s translation makes Barthes’s language a touch more Derridean than it actually is in French: where Howard has ‘deferring’, which perhaps implies the original use of the French verb *différer*, Barthes actually enlisted the term ‘*reculant*’ (postponing, pushing back, deferring).

¹⁹ For a fine discussion of Barthes’s non-engagement with Althusser, see Lecercle 2008.

²⁰ Bernard Comment identifies the vertiginous quality of thinking the *Neutral* in his pioneering *Roland Barthes, vers le Neutre: Essai* (2003: 61), which was first published in 1991.